

## **bloom just for you by dicktective, Kypros**

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Abusive Parents, Alcohol, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Grief/Mourning, Implied/Referenced Character Death, Implied/Referenced Child Abuse, Implied/Referenced Drug Use, Loss of Parent(s), M/M, Marijuana, Other Additional Tags to Be Added, Rating May Change, Recreational Drug Use, Steve Harrington's parents suck

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Jonathan Byers, Nancy Wheeler, Robin Buckley, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Jonathan Byers/Steve Harrington

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**Summary:**

Steve sort of feels like maybe he spent his whole life mourning what his father was and now that he's dead, maybe it'll be like Jonathan said. Maybe he'll need to mourn everything he wasn't.

Or: Steve's dad dies suddenly and he doesn't know how to process his grief. Jonathan, however, is there to help hold him together.

# 1. paint the rust

## Author's Note:

this wouldn't exist if it wasn't for [kypros](#) who basically wrote all of jonathan's dialogue

hopefully this goes somewhere. guess we'll see!  
s3 spoilers in the end notes!

The spring flowers had long since sprouted through the late-March frost and have started to wilt in the midafternoon heat of early summer when the Harrington household gets a phone call that changes everything.

The wildflowers in the woods behind the house die off by the end of the week and are replaced with artful arrangements of carefully selected pale lilies and carnations on every inch of counter space inside. A single white orchid with three blooming flowers is sent to his mother with an attached *Sorry for Your Loss* condolences card tucked into a clear plastic holder that had been stabbed into the gravel and dirt holding the delicate roots.

“You don’t water it, you use ice cubes,” is the first and only thing his mother says to him that week. And later, when he thinks about it, he should have known that her instructions on orchid care could have been a sign that she would disappear on him the way she does.

The sun is relentless as it beats down on where they’re standing in all black around his father’s plot as the casket is lowered into the ground. His mother, to whom appearances are the most important, dabs a white handkerchief—the *DSH* initials embroidered neatly along the edge—to the corners of her eyes as she keeps her shoulders pulled back and head held high, crying silently as the priest says a few words (probably the same words he says at every funeral, Steve thinks).

It’s a Tuesday morning and the reception is being held at the church where his parents erratically forced him to go throughout his childhood. Important to them, because, as they had always liked to

remind him, it's where they got married. He had very few memories of the place and could probably count on two hands the number of times he'd attended a Sunday service. Could count on one hand the number of times he paid attention.

*DSH*, just like the handkerchief, is engraved on the shiny silver flask that's tucked into the breast pocket of his too warm suit jacket, the one he keeps stealing swigs from when he gets a moment alone in the bathroom or in the hallway that leads to the church's Sunday school and childcare classrooms.

He thinks he should probably find his mother and apologize for yelling at her as she was helping the church staff uncover the trays of macaroni salad and potato salad and other various salads and casseroles. He thinks maybe he should do a lot of things. Like maybe stop drinking from the flask of vodka at his dad's funeral reception. Or maybe he should just leave. Go home. Go anywhere, desperate to be somewhere other than here, reminded of the fact that he's really... really fucking happy.

Douglas Harrington was an asshole. He was an abusive dick and Steve is glad he's dead. Glad he's out of his life. Steve's free now. And honestly, after everything, his father deserved what he got: a heart attack, alone in a hotel room in Jacksonville on a business trip.

And maybe it makes Steve just as bad as his father, but he was happy to admit to his mother that he hopes his father suffered until his last dying breath.

Mrs. Duncan, their seventy-year-old next-door neighbor that used to watch him as a kid, shakes his hand but doesn't let go as she looks at him with too-large, wolf-like eyes. "Steven, I do hope you know just how much your father loved you, he'll always be watching over—" A small, half-desperate, half-hysterical laugh bubbles up, escaping from his mouth before he finds the sense to close it. Mrs. Duncan's eyebrows draw together in confusion, but she soldiers on, waxing poetic about how lovely his father had always been: Quiet. Respectable.

Steve's eyes dance around the crowd, searching desperately for an excuse to escape this conversation, lips quirked in a barely contained

grin. “He always seemed like such a gentleman—” A bark of laughter this time, loud and bitter, as his eyes land on a pair in the crowd that makes something boil up inside his chest, hotter and angrier than the laughter at her oblivious platitudes, which have stopped in their tracks.

“Steven?” Mrs. Duncan says, eyes trying to find his as he stares at Nancy Wheeler and Jonathan Byers conversing quietly near the drink table. “Are you all right?”

He finally yanks his hand from her grip and turns just as he notices Jonathan’s head sweep across the crowd towards him. Mrs. Duncan calls after him but he’s already halfway across the hall, heading towards the double doors that lead to the Sunday school classrooms. A quick glance over his shoulder and he sees both Byers and Nancy staring at him, lips moving rapidly.

Pushing through the doors, he keeps walking, making his way down the hallway towards the next set of double doors that lead to the dumpsters in the church’s back parking lot. He doesn’t realize his hands have started to shake until he’s trying to unscrew the cap from the flask after pulling it from the pocket from inside his jacket. Slinging back a mouthful of vodka as he makes it to the end of the hall, he shoves through the doors and swallows with a wince.

It’s not necessarily cold out, though the wind makes him shiver as it whips around the building, blowing his hair into his face. He sets the flask down on the ground as he slides down the concrete wall, ass coming into contact with the pavement a little too hard. A still shaking hand pushes the hair out of his eyes and then digs in the back pocket of his pants for his pack of cigarettes.

Just as he’s exhaling a plume of smoke into the gust of wind, the doors he had come through creak open. Knees pulled up, wrists resting over them, he taps his cigarette, glancing towards the door.

He’s not sure who he was expecting. Mrs. Duncan, his mother, maybe Nancy. But not Jonathan. Jonathan who has said maybe ten words to him in the time they’ve known each other. Jonathan who kicked his ass junior year. Jonathan who probably still hated his guts, deep down.

A loud scoff escapes from the back of his throat and he sets the cigarette between his lips again as Jonathan takes a few cautious steps towards him, hands in his pockets.

“Hey, man,” Jonathan says, voice careful like Steve’s a wild animal. Steve digs in his coat pocket, sucking on the cigarette as he searches for the flask, realizing it’s on the ground next to him. He exhales smoke through his nose and then takes the cigarette between his fingers to twist off the silver cap, tossing back a swig of vodka. “Whoa—” Jonathan continues, even more cautious, as he settles on the ground next to him. A tentative hand reaches over and takes the flask. “It’s not even noon, Harrington.”

Steve rolls his eyes, reaching for the flask. Jonathan holds it just out of reach.

“What are you?” he quips, voice tilting into a bitter laugh. “My dad?” He snickers at his own joke, closing his eyes, resting his head against the wall to avoid the look of judgment or pity that he’s sure is written across Jonathan’s face.

He peeks an eye open anyway, sees the deep frown, and sighs. Leaning forward again to reach for the flask, Jonathan holds it at arm’s length again with a small *tsk*.

“I’m fine, Byers. Give me back my flask.”

“You’re not fine,” Jonathan says, voice laced in barely there patience. “You’re drinking from”—he turns the flask over to look at letters that are etched into the side—“Your father’s flask, at his funeral, and Nancy said she heard you tell someone that today was the best day of your life.”

He gives up reaching for the vodka, arms falling limp at his sides, and rolls his eyes. “Why are you even here?”

Everything about Jonathan’s demeanor is already driving him fucking crazy. The way everyone has been treating him for the last few days; like he’s made of glass—no, like he’s a piece of wet tissue paper being held against the wind. But Jonathan’s voice is so, so hesitant when he says, “You’re supposed to make sure your friends are okay when their

parents pass away.”

Steve lets out a disbelieving scoff and mutters a sharp, “*Friends*.” Jonathan pauses, seemingly caught off guard by Steve’s comment. “I’m fine,” Steve continues, though Jonathan talks over him almost immediately.

“We’re not *good* friends, Steve, but we’re friends,” he says, voice more firm now, almost like he’s a little angry about it. “Also you’re *fine*’ and yet you’re drinking whiskey at 11 AM on a Tuesday.”

“Vodka,” Steve corrects, making a lunge for the flask once again. He’s a little too drunk now, the world feels sluggish and lopsided, and Jonathan’s quicker than he’d expected. “I’m *fine*,” he whines, leaning into Jonathan’s space a little too close, still reaching for the flask. Jonathan leans away.

“If you’re fine—which you’re not—then you don’t need the vodka,” Jonathan says, matter-of-fact, chin stuck out in defiance, eyebrows raised to communicate the unspoken: *try me*. “And, dude, your breath smells awful,” he mumbles, shoving at Steve’s shoulder.

Letting himself fall back against the wall, he rolls his eyes and shoves the cigarette between his lips to take one last, long drag before he stubs it out and tosses the butt a few feet away. “I *am* fine. He’s dead. He was an asshole. It’s not that deep.”

It’s quiet aside from the occasional din of traffic that travels from the streets surrounding the church. Jonathan keeps rotating the flask in his hands and when Steve looks over at him, he looks like he’s about to say something. He stops short, though, and chews on his lip for a moment, eyes glued to the pavement between his shoes. He starts again, “When my Dad took off when I was 12...” He talks slowly like he’s considering every word, every inflection of his voice. “My mom kept asking me if I was okay. I told her I was ‘fine’ a lot too. I wasn’t fine though. I was angry.”

Steve tries to process all of this. Tries to understand why Jonathan needs him to know this information.

“It’s okay not to be okay, Steve,” Jonathan finishes, voice gentle and

soft. Steve thinks that maybe this was how his mother should have sounded, that comforting and understanding tone should've come from her three days ago. Maybe he'd feel differently now if she'd just —

Steve lets out a snort. "You read that on the inside of some condolences card at Melvald's?"

"No, jackass," Jonathan snaps. "It's called empathy."

A genuine, bright laugh bursts out of him. Full, from his chest. "Friends. Do friends call each other 'jackass'? At a parent's funeral?"

Jonathan gives him a sheepish grin, looking at the flask. "Only when they're being stubborn." He turns it over in his hands one more time before he decides to twist off the cap and takes a swig himself. "I am sorry though, about your dad."

Rolling his eyes he grabs the flask back from Jonathan, who doesn't put up a fight anymore. "Yeah, well..." he heaves a heavy sigh, playing with the lid between his fingertips. "You don't have to be. I'm... I'm a shitty person, right? You've always thought that. I know you've always thought that about me. It's fine,"—He says, cutting off whatever argument Jonathan tries to start about this point—"I know. I know what you think of me, okay? But you're right. Because this is the best day of my life. And I'm happy. I'm really fucking happy. He's gone and I've never been happier in my life, okay? And I know how that looks."

He can feel Jonathan's eyes on him, watching him, but Steve keeps his eyes glued on the letters etched into the metal of the flask. Jonathan reaches over and gently takes it back. Steve doesn't put up a fight either.

"You used to be a shitty person, right? You're not as shitty anymore —" Steve snorts. "Hey, *I've* been a shitty person, I've done shitty things too." They're quiet as Steve processes this, gives him half a shrug. And then Jonathan continues: "But, Steve, if you're so happy, then why do you look so miserable?"

Sighing, he leans forward and pulls the pack of cigarettes out again,

setting a second one between his lips. He offers the pack to Jonathan with a raised eyebrow, surprised when Jonathan reaches forward to accept it.

His eyes pause and his fingers hover in the air for a moment and Steve's pulse picks up as he remembers that he'd quickly rolled and shoved two joints into the pack late last night. Jonathan says nothing for a moment, just blinks before he finally plucks a cigarette out and sets it between his lips. Steve lights his cigarette, passing the lighter, inhaling deeply, and trying to ignore the flutter of his pulse and the immediate and acute worry that Jonathan is judging him.

It's quiet for a long time, the two of them sitting in companionable silence while they smoke. Steve's worry subsides and his heart settles and so it's Steve that breaks the silence, clearing his throat and ashing the end of his cigarette between them. "I guess I just..." he sighs. "I just feel bad for my mom, you know? I mean, she's really sad and I...look, I lashed out at her. But he used to cheat on her. All the time. And she knew and she never fucking did anything about it. She never left him. She should be happy he's gone too."

Jonathan seems to consider this for a long moment, taking a few drags off of his cigarette. After a while, he finally looks over to Steve. "My dad isn't dead, but...he used to beat the shit out of me. And sometimes he'd try it on my mom. And Will." Steve's head jerks over to look at him, surprised at how plainly he volunteers this information. But Jonathan's face is quietly contemplative, lacking in the sort of emotion Steve had expected to find there. There's a heavy pause, Jonathan's lip curling up a little, eyes darting over to Steve for a brief second. "She cried when he left. But I was so happy. So relieved. But it felt bad because both of them—my mom and Will—they both missed him."

Steve blinks, turning back to look at his feet. He twists the end of his cigarette against the rubber sole of his dress shoes, trying to figure out what the hell he's supposed to say to that.

"I think it's okay to feel nothing if you didn't like your dad," Jonathan adds. "But it's also okay to feel guilty. It...it hurts to see other people hurting."



He's not sure that it hurts to see his mother hurting. It almost feels good. Almost like it's what she deserves for keeping them stuck here in this shit town with his shit father. For that, he does feel a little guilty. For thinking she deserves to hurt. But only a little.

"She won't talk to me..." Steve says, licking his lips before he adds: "My mom." And he runs a nervous hand through his hair, letting out a desperate sort of laugh when he admits, "I told her he deserved to die?" It sounds like a question. Like he can't believe he had said those words to her. And then: "I don't... I can't—" A sharp inhale. "It hasn't... like... hit me. Yet."

There's a moment he thinks Jonathan might do something painfully embarrassing like put a comforting hand on his shoulder or pat him on the back. Instead, he just nods, squinting out across the parking lot and takes a long drag of his cigarette.

"You know when it does, that we're here for you, right?"

Steve rolls his eyes, and Jonathan must've caught that because he kicks a foot out to nudge at Steve's ankle.

"I know you didn't like your dad. I get it. But grief is weird. People experience it in different ways," he says. And then, quieter: "Tell your mom you're sorry. But also let yourself feel sad, Steve. He was your dad. Even if you don't miss him, you can mourn for what he wasn't."

What he wasn't. He wasn't a lot of things. He wasn't a good dad or a loving husband. He wasn't the stand-up member of the community that every neighbor thought he was. He was abusive and easy to anger. He wonders if he should tell Jonathan that they're not so different in that regard.

Steve sort of feels like maybe he spent his whole life mourning what his father was and now that he's dead, maybe it'll be like Jonathan said. Maybe he'll need to mourn everything he wasn't.

"Yeah, yeah. Okay," he mumbles, taking another drag off of his cigarette. Jonathan's fingers have been carefully turning the flask over and over in the palms of his hands. Chewing on his lip, he watches, wincing against the flash of the sun as it reflects off the

metal and into his eyes every few seconds, just after the *DSH* twists into Jonathan's palm again and again. "I want my flask back," he mumbles.

"How many shots have you had?"

"Does it really matter?" he says with a heavy sigh. "You can hold onto it, for now. I just... I mean I want it back later."

There's a long moment where Jonathan just looks at him, really looks at him. He squirms, uncomfortable. Jonathan shrugs and twists off the cap of the flask. Throwing his head back, he takes two long gulps and winces, coughing as he hands the nearly empty flask back over to Steve. "You can have it back now."

"Seriously?" he mutters, under his breath, shaking it before tossing back the little splash that's left. "Gee, thanks."

Jonathan gives him a grin, tapping off the ash at the end of his nearly finished cigarette.

Steve takes the last pull off of his own and then tosses it a few feet away. "God, I just want to go home. I hate this."

"I'd say ditch," Jonathan muses, stubbing out the butt of his cigarette with a sigh. "But I think you'd regret it." Steve snorts, though that doesn't derail Jonathan, who continues: "Whatever you want to do, though. I'll even drive you home if you want."

"I don't know," Steve says with a heavy sigh. "I just hate how they look at me. The shit they say." He lets out a huff of a laugh, voice shifting to do his best worst Jonathan impression: "It's okay to not be okay."

Jonathan rolls his eyes, and yeah, okay...he deserves that.

"I wouldn't have said that if you weren't walking around pretending like you're walking on cloud nine despite that thousand-yard stare you're giving everyone," Jonathan says. "Mrs. Duncan almost cried."

There's a pause, though it's not heavy or uncomfortable. Steve's fingers play with the hem of his trousers and Jonathan's lay limp in

his lap, elbows resting against his thighs, legs crossed.

The wind picks up for a moment and Steve closes his eyes and lets the back of his head rest against the concrete frame of the building, thinking that maybe this is kind of nice. Being here, that is. With the twittering of birds on the power-line on the edge of the property, the cool spring weather. He almost forgets about the oppressive claustrophobia of wearing a tie, pulled taught against his throat. The sore spots on the back of his Achilles, where his dress shoes have been rubbing all day, is almost bearable. The ache in his chest feels like it's slowly starting to fill over, and not in the drowning sort of way it had been this whole week.

"What do you want to do next, Steve?" Jonathan asks, voice so gentle it's almost a whisper.

A moment later—it could've been thirty seconds, it could've been thirty minutes—he opens his eyes, finding Jonathan's. "Well..." Jonathan's eyes search his face for a moment and he looks away, across the parking lot to the power-line and the birds. "I guess we should go back in."

Jonathan nods, unfolding his legs and standing up. He starts to brush off gravel and dust but slowly stops when Steve doesn't move. "Steve?"

Heaving a heavy sigh, he squints. And then, before he can overthink it too much: "Just... can you stay? Like... can you stay with me?" He runs a hand through his hair. "People will be less likely to want to talk to me if they think I'm already like... engaged in conversation, right?"

Jonathan's shoulders relax and he gives a short, quick nod. Pauses, eyes going distant for a second, and then gives another nod. "Yeah, of course." He offers Steve a hand and Steve takes it, letting himself be pulled to his feet. "Ready to face the music?"

Steve brushes off his own pants and jacket, snorting. "God, this would be a hell of a lot more interesting if they'd *play* some fucking music, actually."

Jonathan laughs, breathless as he walks towards the doors they'd come through, tugging it open and holding it for them to go back inside. "Come on, let's scare some people off."

**Notes for the Chapter:**

chapter title from paint the rust by the dodos

## 2. take off your sunglasses

### Notes for the Chapter:

things are just getting started... enjoy.  
chapter title from ezra furman's song of the same name!

It's sort of surprising, though it probably shouldn't be, that Jonathan seems to find it so easy to talk to everyone that approaches them for the next couple of hours. Steve hardly has to say a word, he practically checks out, all the while starting to sober up. He's grateful that Jonathan steers each and every conversation with a surprising grace that he wasn't even aware Jonathan had.

"I didn't know you knew him," Steve says once Clay Larson, one of his dad's golfing buddies, walks away and heads towards the exit. He ends up stopping, saying goodbye to a few stragglers still left at the reception.

Jonathan, with his hands shoved deep in his pockets, simply shrugs. "Back when I worked at the Big Buy he used to come in once a week to get his wife flowers. Always came through my register and asked me what I thought about what he'd picked."

Steve hums appreciatively, eyes searching the thinning crowd for another face, one that Jonathan had steered them away from in an attempt to avoid that conversation altogether. "And let me guess, you had English with Mr. Osborne?"

Jonathan nods. "Yeah, last year. He was super strict. I think he failed me just because he didn't like my Mom."

Steve laughs. "Yeah, he was a real hardass. Pretty sure he failed me because I'd show up to his class hungover every day."

Jonathan makes a face at that and Steve tries to ignore the immediate realization that Jonathan isn't impressed by this information. "Steve, he probably failed you because you didn't do the work."

The comment sits heavy on Steve's chest and the small quirk to Jonathan's lip falls. "Shit, sorry, I—"

"Nah, it's fine. You're right. He was always *super* disappointed in me. Was a real asshole about it, one time he chewed me out in front of everyone." He shrugs and Jonathan seems to relax a bit. Steve tries to do the same.

Scanning the room one more time, he gives a quiet click of his tongue before making a gesture to the daughter of one of his mom's friends, Susan Pulman, who had been a few years ahead of him in school. "And Sue?"

After twisting to look in her direction, Jonathan turns back, a small smile. "Back when I was at the Arcade, like three summers ago, she tried to bribe me into letting her buy a stuffed animal from the prize wall with money instead of tickets. Did that for like four weeks straight."

Steve exhales a quiet laugh. "And you never gave in?"

"She was pretty and it kept her talking to me," Jonathan admits with a sheepish grin. "But eventually."

It catches Steve off-guard and he lets out a surprised snort, clapping him on the back. "Not so different after all, are we?" He teases. "I had a crush on her back when I was a sophomore. She was a senior. She never looked at me twice."

There's a long moment where Jonathan looks like he wants to either melt into the floor over Steve's comment or say something. He must decide eventually, because he says: "Ended up trading her for weed, instead." And the way he says it doesn't sound out of place, but Steve knows that it's Jonathan's way of testing the waters. He'd seen the two joints in the pack of cigarettes, anyway. Steve knew that. And Jonathan probably knew that Steve knew that.

"No shit?" *You smoke?*

"No shit." *I do*

Steve gives Jonathan another appreciative nod before looking away.

They're quiet for a moment, Steve watching his mom shake hands with her boss as his aunt starts to clean up the empty aluminum trays of food. When he turns back, Jonathan is having a silent but heated argument with Nancy, who is standing awkwardly with her family across the room. He watches the two of them for a moment, the hand gestures and bulging eyes. Jonathan's shoulders jump to his ears, head jerking over to look at him, when Steve clears his throat expectantly.

"So," Steve says, taking a deep breath, pulling his pack of cigarettes from his back pocket. He plucks one of the joints out, tucking it behind his ear, hidden by his hair. Jonathan's eyebrows shoot to his hairline, eyes lingering where the joint is carefully concealed. "This is basically over. Wanna get outta here?"

"Now?"

Steve nods and watches as Jonathan glances over at Nancy. She gives him a strange look before her eyes slide over to Steve; he averts his eyes almost immediately, feeling like he's set something in motion just by catching her gaze.

"My car or yours?" Jonathan asks by way of answering.

Steve quickly glances back over at Nancy one more time. She's leaning over to her mom, mouth moving fast. She's going to come over here and talk to him, he just knows it. He'll have to make his break now while he still has a chance because the last thing he wants to do is field the same platitudes from Nancy that he's been smiling and nodding at all day. Only with the added weight of her intense and obvious judgement on top of it all.

Looking back across the room, checking for his mother, he sees her leaving with his aunt toward the front parking lot without so much as another glance in his direction.

"Mine probably has better speakers," Steve answers, swallowing thickly as he shoves the pack back into his pocket. "No offense."

Jonathan snorts. "None taken."

Risking one last peek back at Nancy, he finds that she's marching across the large banquet hall towards them. Without thinking, he grabs Jonathan's wrist and tugs him in the direction of the exit as quickly as he can.

The brisk clicking of Nancy's heels follow after them down the hall, her short steps doubling to keep up with their long strides. Once they're outside, halfway between the front doors and the car, the clicking stops as she pushes angrily through the door and her heels leave the shiny vinyl flooring of the church.

"Jonathan! Steve!" She shouts. "What the hell?!"

Steve lets go of Jonathan's wrist, rounding his car to the driver's side. When he looks up over the hood of the car, Jonathan is standing a few feet away from the passenger side, turned towards Nancy, who is still marching toward them.

"Where are you two going?" Her voice is still raised as she comes to a stop a few feet away from Jonathan. She looks livid. Steve knows he could always pull the dead dad card to get her to chill out, but he honestly wouldn't have the patience for this sort of reaction from her even if his dad were alive and well.

"Nowhere," Steve answers with an overly exaggerated smile. She narrows her eyes at him, arms crossing over her chest.

"It's *fine*, Nancy," Jonathan says, almost under his breath. Like he's trying to get her to understand that he's handling the situation and this isn't helping. It makes Steve feel a little self conscious, like he's a liability. He lets out a quiet *tsk* as he swings his car door open and falls into the front seat.

"A ton of people are going over to your house, Steve, you know that, right?" Nancy says, ducking to look at him through the passenger window. Her voice carries in muted. He rolls his eyes, shoving the key in the ignition. "You should be there," she's almost shouting now, her blistering anger palpable as the engine turns over. "You can't just not go. It's *your* dad."

"Nancy," Jonathan chides. "*Stop.*"



He says something else, something that Steve doesn't catch. But it makes Nancy straighten up, arms crossing over her chest. There's a pause, anger rolling off of her in waves as she glares at Jonathan. Without another word, she turns and marches back inside to her family.

Jonathan slides into the passenger seat with a tired sigh and Steve eyes him curiously, unsure if he should ask or change the subject. "Wanna get any tapes from your car?" is what he settles on as something like disappointment settles in his gut at his own decision to ignore the awkward weight that hangs in the air between them. Their complicated history with Nancy left unaddressed.

Jonathan shakes his head, fingers immediately going to fiddle with the radio dials. "Nah, we can just listen to the radio." He pauses and glances over at Steve. "You sure you should be driving?"

"I'm sober, scout's honor," Steve answers, holding up three fingers in a boy scout's salute. He shifts the car into reverse, putting an arm behind the passenger seat and twisting around to back out of the parking spot. Jonathan doesn't seem completely convinced by his answer but he doesn't argue. After a moment he settles on the local top 40s station, volume low enough that they can talk if they want to, but loud enough that they can still make out the music over the engine. It feels like Jonathan is waiting for Steve to be the one to break the silence. He doesn't.

Jonathan props an elbow up on the edge of the window and stares out as they turn onto Randolph Way, passing the library and the schools. They keep driving towards Loch Nora and out of the corner of his eye Steve sees Jonathan's head turn ever so slightly to glance his way when they pass the turn into the neighborhood, whizzing past the car-lined street in front of the Harrington house. They drive past the Byers' house too, and when Steve turns onto an unpaved gravel road, heading toward the quarry, he swears he can feel Jonathan relax ever so slightly in the seat next to him. As if he had worried that maybe Steve was going to keep driving straight out of Hawkins, continuing west until they hit Marion or further still to Wabash, Logansport, and straight off into Illinois.

As they make their way slowly up the dirt road, he presses in the

cigarette lighter to get it heated up by the time they reach the spot, just off the road and deep in the woods, with a view of the quarry drop off. Parking the car, he turns off the engine, leaving the keys turned so that the battery still runs and the music still plays through the stereo, louder now that the car is stopped.

The cigarette lighter pops out and Steve can feel Jonathan's eyes on him as he pulls the joint from behind his ear and sets it between his lips. He pulls the lighter out and presses the heated coils to the end of the joint, taking a few short and shallow drags to get it lit. Exhaling, he cracks open his window to let the smoke out, takes another hit, and then passes it to Jonathan.

Steve holds it in until he can't anymore:

"Thanks for coming today." That last hit leaves his lips in a plume, the words feel muted, mingling in his mouth with the taste of the smoke.

Jonathan just nods in response, cheeks pulled hollow, with his lips around the joint. He coughs a few times a moment later, smoke spilling from behind a fist while Steve watches him with an amused smirk. "Fuck, sorry," he gets out, eyes watering. "It's been a while."

They pass the joint back and forth for a few minutes while Rick Springfield laments his romantic woes over Jessie's Girl.

Eventually, Steve leans his chair back, wrists pillowing his head, and stares at the roof of the car. It's only five or six years old but the fabric that's covering the ceiling is starting to detach, the glue getting weaker and weaker with each passing humid, Indiana summer. Without thinking, he raises a hand and lets his fingers rake along the dipping cloth, pushing it up to where it's supposed to live. It falls immediately and he wonders how many more summers it'll last.

"This used to be my dad's car," Steve says as Jonathan takes another hit and passes the joint back over to Steve. He accepts it and sighs, pinching it between his fingers. "His company got him a new one so he gave this one to me."

Jonathan cranks his own window down an inch and looks up at the

ceiling. "Your dad had shitty taste in cars," he says, hand searching for the lever to lean his chair back too. "Expensive but shitty." He finds it and the seat reclines, even with Steve's.

"I'm not gonna share my weed with you if you keep insulting my car, dickhead," Steve says with a huff of a laugh, taking a single hit and passing it back.

Jonathan shoots him an amused smile, fingers brushing against Steve's as he takes the joint. He leans forward to tap it in the ashtray and falls back against the seat with a sigh. "Beemers? All looks, no substance."

Steve rolls his eyes and shifts in his seat, trying to get comfortable. If the steering wheel wasn't in the way, he'd kick his feet up on the dash. He used to do that when he was a kid, before the painful growth spurts and his too long legs got the best of him. His dad hated it; said he'd scuff up the interior.

"It was really fucking cool when I was younger. Used to want to be like him." Steve knows it should feel weird to say that aloud, but he finds he doesn't really care. Not to mention he's high as a fucking kite.

Any other day before today would've been different. But... now that Douglas Harrington's casket is closed, it's like Pandora's box is open. Anything could happen, really. A perfect example is that Jonathan had been stubborn enough to get Steve to shut up for two seconds and admit that he wasn't as happy as he kept insisting he was. He's not sure that he could say the same thing would've happened before today.

"Can't relate," Jonathan says after taking a hit, his voice is slow and meandering and Steve finds that he likes the lilt of it. "Never wanted to be like my dad. Hard to want to be a drunk who sits on the couch all day. If my dad drove a BMW though, maybe it would've been different""

"Yeah. Well, I didn't even really know him, you know?" Steve's fingers struggle to take the joint from Jonathan with how small it's gotten at this point. "But, I didn't really realize that. Not until I was

older." He adjusts his grip and sets it to his lips, pulling on it and offering it back to Jonathan, who shakes his head. Steve shifts to press the end of it in the ashtray, putting it out. "He was never around. I don't know that I ever figured out what he *really* did for work, you know? Like I know it was an office job. Some fancy title. But I didn't really *know*."

Jonathan lets out an almost derisive laugh, hands pillowed behind his head as he grins up at the ceiling of the car. "Nancy said you thought you were going to work for him one day. I think figuring out what he did should have come first."

Steve sucks in a shallow breath at the mention of Nancy. His brain is trying to slowly click into place; every thought dense and weightless all at once. He glances over and it's still a surprise to remember that he's with Jonathan. Jonathan who is dating Nancy. Nancy who he used to be in love with. Nancy who chased them into the parking lot. The parking lot at the church. Where they had his dad's funeral.

But as soon as one thought is finished another begins and takes its place, the path of his thoughts flitting through his fingers like smoke, disappearing before they were ever there to begin with.

"What?" Steve says after a moment.

Jonathan snorts but then looks confused for a moment, like he's trying to follow the path of his own thoughts back to what they'd just been talking about too. "Uhm—oh! We were talking about you working for your dad."

Steve's head lolls back to look out the windshield and he snorts. "Oh, right. Well..." He takes a deep breath, hands plucking at a loose thread in the upholstery. "The only reason that hasn't happened is because I'm a huge fuckin' disappointment. So... nothing I do is ever enough and it never will be. He'll always be disappoi—" he trails off, brows pulling together. Some thought trying to wiggle its way out of his subconscious. "—nted."

"Your dad was an asshole," Jonathan reasons. *Was*. Jonathan isn't paying attention, his eyes are staring out the window on his right. "Disappointing him is like disappointing, I don't know—Mr. Osborne.

Nobody liked him, he's an asshole too."

Was.

His dad *was* an asshole. Mr. Osborne *is* an asshole too.

But Mr. Osborne is still alive. Gerald Osborne would give him after-school detention over something as trivial as showing up to class without a pencil. His father was dead. Douglas Harrington, who had angrily shoved Steve against the front door and given him a fat lip when he brought home a report card that kept him on the bench during a playoff game, was six feet under.

They were both assholes and they were both disappointed by him. But only his dad is dead.

"Yeah," Steve says, staring up at the drooping ceiling. "Yeah, he fucking was." His voice comes out broken and the corners of his mouth twitch into a frown. Suddenly, he presses his palms to his eye sockets, willing himself not to cry. "Shit."

The atmosphere in the car shifts almost immediately and, after a long and quiet moment, so does Jonathan. A hand rests tentatively on Steve's shoulder. "Hey... Steve—"

"I'm fine," he chokes out. He doesn't shake Jonathan's hand from his shoulder. He doesn't move. Maybe if he doesn't move Jonathan won't know that he's started to cry. Jonathan's fingers curl into his shoulder and he knows he's failed. "Fuck. I fucking hated Mr. Osborne." He lets out a wet laugh. "He always told me I had to try harder or I'd never —" Steve cuts himself off, biting on the inside of his lip to keep it from quivering. His hands drop from his eyes, but he turns to look out the side window, away from Jonathan. "I'm fine.... I am."

Jonathan pulls his hand away and Steve thinks that maybe that's worked, maybe he'll accept that answer and they'll never talk about this again. But Jonathan takes a deep breath, and then: "You can't let one shitty person define who you are, Steve," he starts. Steve is pretty sure they both know that they're not talking about Mr. Osborne. He tries to ignore the roiling feeling of embarrassment that washes over him at the fact that he's getting a lecture from Jonathan Byers, of all

people. That he's *crying* in front of him. "People are people. Some... some are worse than most. Some are great. But if you go around measuring yourself against people like... like Mr. Osborne..." Then comes a quiet *tch*, and Steve looks over to find Jonathan looking out the passenger side window. "You're never going to be happy."

He wonders who Jonathan is thinking of in his own life as he explains this. He wonders, for an extremely brief and inexplicably embarrassing moment, if Jonathan measures himself against... well... Against him. Against *The* Steve Harrington. As soon as the thought makes itself known, he sweeps it aside with a small shake of his head, eyes going back out the driver's side window to stare up at the trees as they shift gently in the wind.

He's not The Steve Harrington he used to be, but wondering if Jonathan compares himself to that version of Steve still feels uncomfortable now. Perhaps it's because it feels narcissistic? (Not that he's ever really had a problem with being a touch narcissistic.) Perhaps it's just because he can't imagine that Jonathan spends much time thinking about him at all. And that almost makes him feel sick to his stomach for some reason.

It's midday and the sun is high in the sky, heat coiling in through the open windows. It's not uncomfortable, it's nice actually other than the fact that his hands feel a little clammy and his mouth and eyes feel a little dry from the weed.

"Osborne came into Family Video a few weeks ago," Steve says, still staring out the window, wet eyes glued to the tangled branches of the huge pine trees that tower around them. He swipes a hand across his face, wiping away any traces of the tears that had trailed down his cheeks. "Didn't even recognize me. Always gave me so much shit for not being smart enough. Not working harder. Made my life miserable and it was all for fucking *nothing*. But he was right, wasn't he? I'm doing nothing with my life."

If Jonathan had noticed Steve wiping his cheeks, he doesn't say anything. Instead, he clears his throat and says, "My mom said Mr. Osbourne got arrested in '77 for a DUI." Steve's head whips towards Jonathan to find him still looking out his own window, fingers tapping a slow and careful pattern across his knee. "There was an

article in the paper about it and everything." A half laugh, followed by a sigh. "He was such an uptight asshole at school. Acted like he was the end-all-be-all in terms of success and authority...in reality, he was just a sad drunk."

Steve snorts. "I mean... I'm the sad drunk now, right?" Jonathan doesn't respond. The wind whistles through the cracked windows and the radio station starts a cycle of commercials. Steve hits the power button because it's something to do and because the next thing he says feels too raw, and he feels exposed. Maybe it'll distract Jonathan and take the focus off of him. "I just... I wanted to prove him wrong."

It was a mistake. Turning the radio off. Saying that out loud. All of it. Having Jonathan in his car is a mistake too.

It's too silent now, the only noise is the rustling of the trees and the birds calling to each other through the forest. Steve wants to look over at Jonathan, to see what expression he finds written plainly across his face. He takes a shaky breath and resists.

Finally, Jonathan does speak, his words are careful, each one of them measured. "Sometimes... the people you want the approval from the most don't matter. Sometimes they're just shitty people." Steve frowns. "You didn't need his approval, Steve." He thinks on that for a moment and realizes that if anyone would be the authority on living a life free from the judgement of others, it would probably be Jonathan. "You could've been everything he wanted you to be and he probably would've found something to critique." Jonathan pauses and when he speaks again, his voice is so firm and serious that Steve looks over at him, their eyes locking. He repeats: "*You didn't need his approval.*"

Seemingly, out of nowhere, tears well up in Steve's eyes again. It feels like his chest is about to cave in with the pressure of it all: of Jonathan's eyes boring into him, the earnestness of his voice as he tells Steve what he apparently needs to hear. The emotions, muted and mellowed by the shared weed, are abruptly overwhelming.

This entire conversation suddenly feels like an emotional rug burn. Like road rash. Every secret, hidden-away part of him pulled out on a rope, slipping through his hands as he tries desperately to hold on,

the friction leaving him raw. It's all there, out in the open.

He is instantly, acutely aware that, somehow, Jonathan Byers might know him better than anyone else. Of all the people in his life, of all the people in their small, Midwestern town, he never would have thought those words would bounce around in his brain, uninhibited. It leaves him flustered, knee bouncing as he pulls his eyes away.

"Yeah, well, I didn't want his approval," he says, staring at the knobs and buttons of the radio. The words taste like a lie. "It just feels like he got the last fucking word. And he always got the last fucking word, you know?"

Jonathan's head turns away too, giving Steve a moment to swipe at his cheeks again, to not bring attention to the fact that he's crying. "It's not the last word, but you're doing better than he is, Steve," Jonathan says as he looks out over the dashboard. "You're the one that's alive. The one with people that actually care about you."

Steve scoffs.

"Seriously," Jonathan continues. "And a whole group of kids that care about you. Mike included, even if he is sometimes an asshole. And it's not just the kids..."

He trails off, the rest of his words go unsaid. Steve understands what Jonathan is implying, the earnestness in his voice gives it away. Steve frowns at his steering wheel, hand going to the lever to raise his chair back up into a sitting position.

Thinking back to their conversation in the back parking lot of the church, his stomach starts to churn. This is the longest the two of them have been in the same room with each other. They'd barely talked back during Steve's senior year, when he and Nancy were still together. When she was friends with Jonathan and nothing more and the two of them had spent awkward lunch periods and brief moments together after school.

And then that fucking halloween party had happened. And neither of them had said more than a few polite sentences to each other since then.



“Steve?”

“We've barely talked in—what? Two years? And before that we weren't friends at all. My dad dies and suddenly you and Nancy decide to show up out of the woodwork?” He shakes his head and continues to study the steering wheel, anger building up hot in his chest, cheeks warm with embarrassment as he realizes how stupid all of this is. “You don't have to pretend to care about me. You can relay that message to Nancy, too.”

Steve starts the car again, Jonathan sighing heavily as he adjusts the seat to sit up straight. “That's not—” A quiet: ‘what I meant’, or maybe just the word ‘fair’, on the tip of Jonathan's tongue. It goes unspoken and he sighs. He starts over, the same fiery stubbornness showing itself as it had earlier that afternoon. “What do you want me to say? That I'm sorry? I am. I'm sorry shit happened the way it did. I'm sorry we lost touch. But it wasn't just me, Steve.” Steve's jaw clenches, teeth grinding together. Then, quieter, “It doesn't mean people don't care about you. Life is...messy. But we—” another pause. “I'm trying now.”

Steve's face settles into a quiet fury. He turns the radio back on and twists the volume knob up until the music is sufficiently loud. He yells over the commercial that's playing: “I'll drop you off at your car.”

Jonathan mutters an almost too soft, “fine.”

His fingers drum anxiously at the steering wheel as they drive and Steve realizes he's probably a touch too high to be driving at all. Eventually, however, they turn into the church parking lot. It's empty aside from Jonathan's car. He parks near it and Jonathan turns down the radio, trying to grab Steve's gaze. “So...is this it?”

Steve feels angrier than when this all started. Angrier than he was at the universe for giving him such a shitty father and then making him upset that it had the gall to take him away.

Steve's grip goes tight on the steering wheel for a brief second. He just wants answers. He wants to know why his father hated him. Steve wants to know why his mother never stood up for him, never

protected him. He wants to know why.

"Why now?" pointed and angry as he finally turns to look at Jonathan, fingers tapping impatiently at the steering wheel again. "You said you were trying now, why?"

Jonathan recoils slightly, as if Steve had raised his fist and threatened to punch him. But he immediately recovers, blinking and then meeting Steve's stare with a stubborn jut of his jaw. "Your dad died, Steve." It's Steve's turn to recoil at that. The pity that threads through his voice. Jonathan must notice because he sighs and looks away briefly, out the windshield. Then, as if the dam has come crumbling down, he lets it all out, all the shit that had been quietly simmering between them all afternoon. "I fucked Nancy. You hated me. It doesn't mean I hated you. It doesn't mean that I can keep pretending to hate you when something shitty happens. This is a really shitty thing, Steve, even if you think it's fine. I know I'm an asshole—" he lets out a harsh exhale "—I know I am. But I would be a bigger one if I didn't try to at least be there during this."

So that was it. Jonathan had decided for them. Had decided to finally air it all out in the open. After almost two years they were going to talk about the fact that Nancy had essentially left him for Jonathan.

"I don't care about you and Nancy, okay?" He practically spits out. "I'm over that, granted it took me a while, but I am... And I don't hate you." He takes a deep breath trying to relax, to calm down and remember why he had asked that question in the first place. "Earlier... I told you I wanted you to treat me like none of this had happened because it would've been nice if you'd done, you know, all of *this* sooner." He blinks a few times, hand on the steering wheel picking at a loose thread in the upholstery. "I know you're sorry for, you know, not doing that. Not talking to me and just... Being around sooner. I get it..." He swallows, feeling like he's finally set himself up to arrive at the point: "And I do appreciate you trying to be here during this. I just... I guess I don't really trust that you're going to try to be here after." He shrugs. "And that's fine, man. Do whatever, but don't pretend you care if you're gonna stop after shit blows over."

The muscles in Jonathan's jaw work for a moment and then he lets out a controlled exhale.

"I'm not...." He stops himself, gaze turning to look out the windshield once again. Eyes scanning the parking lot. "I'm not going anywhere, Steve." He sounds tired and guilty. But more than that he sounds frustrated. "Whatever you throw at me, I'll take it."

Steve responds with a breathless, disbelieving laugh, almost a scoff. "Nancy know that?" It comes out not at all sharp, like he wants it to be, instead it just sounds a little sad. "She seemed real confused by the fact that you left with me."

Jonathan rolls his eyes, letting out a soft *tch*. "She was probably just worried. You know Nancy. You weren't exactly doing great at the memorial."

"Well..." He trails off, letting out a sigh before he continues. "I'm sorry I blew up at you. Okay? I'm—We..." Another pause, closing his eyes for a moment before looking over at Jonathan, defeated. "This is fucking weird, right? Like this whole day? You and me? It's weird."

A quiet moment passes where Jonathan seems to consider how to answer that. And then he lets out a soft laugh. "You know, yeah. Trust me... I've wanted to hit you like...five times by now. The only thing stopping me was the fact that we just went to your Dad's funeral." He winces, shooting Steve an apologetic grimace. "Sorry, bad joke. Really bad joke."

It catches Steve off guard and he snorts, grinning before bursting out laughing. "God, I wanted to hit you so many times, too," Steve says. Jonathan's eyebrows go to his hairline which only makes Steve laugh harder. Jonathan lets out a quiet laugh, when Steve leans over and puts his head on the steering wheel, chuckling. "Jesus, my mom would've killed me, I think. Imagine: the two of us getting into a fight at the memorial. Knocking over that ridiculous flower display."

"You're the one who asked me to stick by you," Jonathan says, laughing with a small shake of his head. "But, at least it would have made things interesting. I was getting real tired of making excuses, trying to avoid people. Doing all the talking while you were zoned out, off in space... and you weren't even *high* yet."

Another peel of laughter at that and Jonathan joins him, quieter

but... still...

Steve looks over at him, just watching his face as their laughter dies off; watching the smile fade a bit as they stare at each other, Steve's expression barely fond and Jonathan's inching towards confusion.

"Yeah well, thanks for sticking by me," Steve says after he pulls his eyes away and studies the dashboard, leaning back in his seat. "I think I would have thrown myself from the roof if I had to talk to one more great aunt or golf buddy or whatever."

He can still feel Jonathan's eyes watching him closely, quiet and considering as he reaches down to unbuckle his seatbelt. "The church only has one floor," Jonathan reminds him. "But if you still have that bat, I'm sure I could help with breaking your legs."

"Rain check?" Steve jokes with a huff of a laugh. "What're you up to next Friday? Any other torture devices you need?"

Jonathan hums, scratching at the back of his neck. "A lighter. Gasoline. Maybe a bear trap. But Friday works. I even have more weed."

"Last I checked, you were the one with the bear trap."

Another snort from Jonathan as he looks out the window, a hand on the door handle. "Yeah, no. Hopper found it and took it away. So, no bear trap anymore. Guess you'll just have to settle for weed only."

Steve laughs in disbelief, tapping his hands to the beat of the song that starts up on the radio, "No bear trap, no deal, Byers!" He says with a shrug, reaching over to turn up the music. "And you said you hadn't smoked in a while so leave your dusty bushweed at home. We can smoke the other joint I have while you maim me. It'll take the edge off. See you Friday," he shouts over the song as Jonathan swings the door open and gets out.

Jonathan waves him off, walking slowly across the parking lot and disappears into the driver's seat of his own car. There's a moment where his car misfires, the pistons protesting loudly, but it rattles to life on the second attempt. Then, without fanfare or so much as a

second glance, Jonathan guides the car onto the road, making a left towards Maple Street.

Steve watches as the bumper of the beat up old Ford LTD vanishes beyond the lights and all that's left is himself sitting in the empty church parking lot, staring at the crooked letters on the signboard near the door that announce the time and date of his father's memorial service.

Steve blinks, scowling as he shifts the car back into drive, turning right towards Fairbanks instead of left.

He assumes he isn't going to see Jonathan on Friday, but the thought of it had been nice. In fact, he'd probably never see him again. They'd go back to the way things had been—carefully sidestepping each other and ignoring the fact that they were consistently in each other's peripheries. Today had been an anomaly.

And even if Jonathan had insisted that he wasn't going anywhere, the rational part of Steve's brain screamed at him in protest: this had been a pity thing. A dead dad thing. A thing that happens once in a lifetime because it's the least someone could do in the face of another's unbearable amount of tragedy.

But again, even if all of it had been somehow played out under the pressures of sympathy and guilt, it had been nice of Jonathan to agree to it. A nice way to end an otherwise unpleasant day. And niceties, he thinks, on a day like today were allowed, even if they were bold faced lies.

### 3. manic upswings

#### Summary for the Chapter:

You know how sometimes life gets really crazy and then you stare at a word doc for like five months straight and somehow the chapter you're writing hasn't written itself? Weird. Anyway! Enjoy!

It's probably the third time that Robin has said, "I'm really sorry I couldn't be there." Her voice comes through the speaker, crackling slightly. It always does when she calls from her old bedroom phone and not the one her parents keep on the counter in the kitchen.

He sighs, and for the third time he tells her, "It's *fine*, Robin. It's not your fault." He's sitting on the floor in the foyer, the phone's cradle pulled away from the decorative phone nook that's built into the staircase. "Keith was an asshole about giving us both the time off. I know, I was there."

Robin sighs, "Okay, but...I'm sorry for not calling sooner."

He groans, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Honestly, I'm over the phone calls. I'm over all of it." The pity, the floral arrangements, the pans of casserole that he'll have to dump in the trash because the fridge is full and his mother is gone, so it's just him and it's too much food for one person. "When's your next day off?" he asks, trying to change the topic. "My mom's in Arizona. I have the house to myself."

Robin stays quiet for a moment and he almost starts to wonder if the call dropped when she finally does speak again. "Why is she in Arizona?" Her voice betrays her suspicion, each syllable angry and staccatoed.

"Jesus, Rob!" He sighs, scrubbing at his forehead with an annoyed huff. "I don't know, okay? My aunt called yesterday morning to see if she'd left for her flight yet and I didn't even realize she was gone, let alone going at all."

An incredulous noise makes its way down the line. "Are you fucking

*kidding me?!*” she says. “I swear to god, Steve, your parents are such fucking—,”

“When are you off?” he snaps, cutting off whatever she was about to say.

She lets out a noise that falls somewhere between, “I can’t believe we’re not going to talk about this”, and, “If you don’t cut the attitude I’m gonna straight up murder you”. He can hear her suck a deep, steady breath in. “Sunday afternoon.”

“Okay, great, well—,” Unexpectedly, the doorbell rings. He takes an equally deep breath in and then exhales, confused. “Someone’s at the door...”

“Well...answer it?” she says, like this should be obvious. “I’ve gotta get ready for my shift anyway.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ll see you Sunday?” he asks quickly, starting to stand up. He grabs the cradle and puts it back in the phone nook, glancing at the front door.

“Sure, Steve,” she says, sounding tired. “Later.”

“Later,” he responds, distracted.

Hanging up the phone, he pads across the tiled floor towards the front door, running a hand through his dirty hair and tugging at his old and wrinkled t-shirt—the one that he’s been wearing for three days. The door swings open and he’s not sure what to expect. Maybe another casserole shoved in his face. Maybe a girl scout troop trying to sell cookies. Instead he finds Jonathan Byers.

Jonathan looks almost breathless, standing windswept on his front porch, a thumb hooked around one of the belt loops on his jeans, the other hand gripping the strap of his backpack that’s slung over one shoulder. A quiet moment passes between them, one of expectant acknowledgement versus confused curiosity.

“What are you doing here?” Steve asks, right as Jonathan says:

“Hey, you gonna invite me in?”

Steve blinks and Jonathan blinks right back.

“It’s Friday,” is Jonathan’s answer to Steve’s question. Steve’s answer to Jonathan’s is:

“Oh...yeah. Yeah...come in.” He stands back, opening the door a little wider.

Jonathan slides past him, walking into the foyer, glancing back at Steve, who is still a little confused as to what, *exactly*, is happening.

“I tried to call,” Jonathan says, because neither of them has said anything and it seems like he’s trying to fill the silence. “But the line was busy.”

Steve stares at him for a moment. “Oh, right,” he says, pointing to the telephone nook. “I was on the phone with Robin, actually.”

Jonathan nods and then watches Steve for another brief moment before he repeats, “It’s Friday...” And then: “You forgot, didn’t you?”

“No,” Steve blurts out. Because he didn’t forget, he remembers them joking in his car, about the bear trap and the baseball bat. “I just... didn’t think you were serious.”

He really doesn’t expect the reaction that he gets. Jonathan almost looks...annoyed. Though his annoyance quickly shifts into a shrewd assessment of Steve’s person.

“It’s three in the afternoon, Steve. What are you wearing?” He looks Steve up and down almost pointedly, taking in the wrinkled pajamas: an old, stained Hawkins High varsity basketball team shirt and a pair of flannel pajama pants that are a little short, hitting just above his ankles.

Steve lets out a scoff, because what the fuck? What did he do to invite this sort of judgement from Jonathan fucking Byers of all people? Jonathan in his faded black band shirt, the collar threadbare and a hole in the jeans he’s got on. Scrutinizing him.

“It’s my day off, man, I can dress however I want.”



Jonathan stares at him for a moment, unconvinced. But eventually his eyes slide to the bright red door that Steve is still holding open and then back to his face. "So you don't want free weed?"

Steve considers Jonathan, a scrutinizing narrowing of his eyes. Nothing about Jonathan's expression changes save a small shift of his eyebrows, refusing to look away as the silence stretches on, almost uncomfortable. Then Steve sighs, pushing the door to let it swing shut.

"Let me go get dressed," he mumbles, walking towards the back of the house. "You can leave your things in the living room, if you want. And we're not smoking that dusty shit weed you probably forgot you even had."

"It's not *that* old," Jonathan calls after him.

He heads into the laundry room off the kitchen, grabbing a pair of jeans from the basket of dirty clothes and a clean shirt from the dryer. He stands in the doorway to change; dirty shirt off, clean shirt on. As the collar pulls past his eyes, he opens them to find Jonathan, sans backpack, cautiously entering the kitchen to peer around curiously at the mess of pizza boxes, empty beer bottles and cans, and stack of dishes in the sink.

"Your mom here?"

The question makes the hair on the back of Steve's neck stand up, a prick of annoyance settling in the peripheries of his emotions, brushing it off as the same annoyance that he'd felt with Robin harping on with the same line of questioning. He tries to quell the feeling, reasoning that there's no way he could've known that his mom had left town or that he and Robin had just gone over this.

Jonathan's hands are shoved in his pockets, looking like he's trying to resist the urge to start cleaning. Steve almost hates him for it. For all of it. He continues to tell himself that the shit with Nancy might not matter anymore. But the judgement, the restraint he's showing, skirting around the obvious and ignoring it in favor of not stepping on any toes, makes Steve feel like he should be ashamed and he doesn't think he needs to be. He's fine. The kitchen isn't that bad. The

rest of the house isn't that bad. He's not doing too bad, himself. He's...he's doing just fine.

"No," he answers, shoving off the pajama bottoms and leaving them in the dirty laundry bin. He slides one leg through his jeans and then the other, glancing up at Jonathan, who is staring at the liquor cabinet, the doors left open haphazardly. Steve zips up his jeans, fixing the pockets as Jonathan steps a little further into the kitchen, leaning against the kitchen island.

"Oh, cool...when will she be back?"

He gives a shrug of his shoulders in response, flicking off the light switch in the laundry room. "She's in Arizona, I think?"

"You think?" Jonathan asks, but Steve barrels on, talking over him.

"We shouldn't smoke in the house though, she'll know. Even if she gets back in five months and we've replaced the sheet rock and the carpets and rugs. She always knows."

"Five months. That's a...uh...a long time." Jonathan's eyes linger on Steve's chest and Steve looks down, noticing a grease stain that's set in the weave of the fabric, basically permanent now that he's run it through the dryer. There's a furrow between Jonathan's brows, a frown pulling at his lips. "I hope you're joking." Steve clears his throat, ready to answer but then Jonathan's eyes drift away, looking over his shoulder to the sliding glass door in the laundry room that leads to the back patio. "Backyard?"

"Yeah...it's still a little cold to swim, but we can sit by the pool," Steve says, a slow nod as he twists to look over his shoulder out the back door.

They're greeted by the late afternoon sun that hangs between slow-moving clouds. Steve practically prances, bare feet burning on the sun-soaked concrete as he settles onto the ledge of the pool, the heat lingering in the hot pavement, warming his hands and ass. He pulls a knee up, rolling his jeans halfway up his shin on one leg and then the other. Jonathan settles next to him, pulling an assortment of things from his pocket and letting them scatter on the ground in front of

him, sitting with his legs crossed.

Dangling his feet into the pool, the too cool water laps at his skin, soothing the soles of his feet. He looks over at Jonathan's hands as they work to roll a joint, fingers plucking out a rolling paper, opening a grinder to empty the contents into it.

Steve picks up the little baggie of weed, bringing it to his nose to sniff. It's strong. Stronger than he expects. He eyes Jonathan as he sets it back down, a low whistle. "Smells good," is his only comment.

Jonathan glances over at him, a small smirk toying at the edges of his mouth. "You were right about my old weed—," Steve lets out a harsh laugh and Jonathan rolls his eyes, focusing back on his fingers. "I bought some new shit from Danny."

"Danny...Walton?"

Jonathan nods. "I work with him. You know him?"

Steve sighs, kicking his feet out, treading the water. "Yeah, he won't sell to me. Had beef with fucking Tommy Hagan back a few years ago. Even though Tommy and I aren't friends anymore."

Jonathan lets out a quiet laugh, shaking his head, lifting the joint to his mouth, tongue sliding across the paper before his nails tuck it closed, twisting the ends. He holds it out, plucked between his thumb and forefinger, offering it to Steve.

Steve takes it, patting at his pockets for his lighter. "Uh...you got a light?"

Jonathan snorts, leaning back to pull one from his pockets. "Thought you were the stoner. Aren't you supposed to have one on you at all times?"

He takes the proffered lighter with a roll of his eyes, struggling to get it lit in the wind. "Fuck off. You *just* saw me get dressed," he says, the joint bobbing with each movement of his lips as he speaks. The flame finally flicks on, quivering in the wind as he inhales deeply, holding it in his chest before he passes it back over to Jonathan who snickers at his response. He tilts sideways to blow the smoke away from

Jonathan and the wind sweeps it back towards him, anyway. "You watched me take these jeans out of the laundry hamper. If my mom found my lighter in the wash she'd have a fit."

Jonathan hums, taking a small hit before exhaling the smoke through his nose. He leans back on one of his palms and takes another hit, exhaling through his mouth this time, head tilted towards the pale blue sky. "Well she's not here right now." Steve holds his breath, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Then comes a careful: "So, what's...new?"

He hears the question for what it is. Not what Jonathan wants it to appear to be on the surface. *What's new? Why is his mother gone? How has he been since his father's funeral?* Steve lets out a huff of a laugh, staring down at his feet, at the way the water distorts them as it shifts. He knows the answer.

"Nothing." He tilts his head back toward the house, gesturing with a nod of his chin. "This is how it's always been. Nothing's changed."

Jonathan passes the joint back, clearly trying to hide a smirk. "You're telling me you always live like that? There's like. 5 pizza boxes in the kitchen alone. And the number of beer cans...your mom has only been gone for what...? A few hours?"

"Yesterday morning," Steve retorts. "But she hasn't been here all week." He waves a hand dismissively after setting the joint between his lips, sucking in a shallow breath before taking the smoke deeper into his chest. He speaks again as he exhales: "Pizza's easy, anyway. They're right next to work and they give me a discount."

He takes one more hit and passes the joint back. Jonathan takes it with a scoff and a disbelieving shake of his head. "A diet of beer and pizza. And you still look like—," He gestures vaguely in Steve's direction as he smokes.

Steve shoots him an amused look, raising an eyebrow. He leans back onto the palms of his hands, kicking his feet slowly in the water. "Like what?" He asks, voice teasing as he bounces his shoulder into Jonathan's.

Jonathan sputters, coughing for a moment before giving Steve a flustered, "Like...like that." Another wave at his body. And, yeah. Okay, so maybe Steve's already feeling it a little. The weed.

Letting out a delighted laugh, he leans back, resting his back against the warm pavement, head pillowed by his hands. Jonathan holds the joint between them and Steve plucks it from his fingers, setting it to his lips after he answers with a shrug: "I run. Every morning."

"Must be a really long run," Jonathan says, voice sounding a little distant. Steve can tell that he's feeling it too. The weed.

Closing his eyes, he lets the sun warm his skin, wishing he had thought to bring his sunglasses. "Five miles, so..." He trails off, giving a small shrug of his shoulders, shirt dragging against the pavement. "Not that long, really. Used to do eight." Jonathan's only response is a small, distracted hum.

Steve blinks and sits up passing back the joint. He stares out across the pool, watching as the filter gurgles—a sharp sucking sound as it pulls in the last of the dead leaves from the previous fall. There's a lot of them, floating aimlessly on the surface of the water. He never finished raking the yard, he remembers. Told his dad he'd do it for weeks, and then he never did. Now, the yard is filled with them. Dead leaves. Dead leaves that get swept into the pool with the spring winds and sucked into the filter.

"You should come sometime," Steve says, equally absent.

"Running?" Jonathan coughs, his exhale laced with smoke. Steve nods and Jonathan lets out a quiet chuckle. "I'm so out of shape. I'd give up at the end of my driveway."

Steve rolls his eyes, the back of his hand hitting Jonathan in the stomach with a grin. "What are you talking about? Out of shape? You're scrawny as hell. You could probably eat five pizzas and not gain a fucking pound." If he didn't know any better, he'd have mistaken the shift in Jonathan's body language for surprise, but he recognizes the discomfort in the way his fingers tug at the hem of his shirt, pulling it away from his body. Steve frowns, trying to catch Jonathan's gaze. "Hey, you've got nothing to be ashamed of man, you

look good. I wish I had your metabolism, okay?"

Jonathan doesn't really acknowledge what he's said beyond a small hum, and Steve tries to shake off the self-conscious feeling he's found threading through his chest, taking the joint from Jonathan as he passes it over to him. Silence wraps around them as they pass it back and forth and he tries not to think too hard about the compliment he just gave Jonathan. Tries not to let the paranoia latch on, panic already getting his heart racing.

"Fuck, I'm hungry," Jonathan blurts out, seemingly out of nowhere.

Steve sucks on what's left of the joint, not sure if there's any weed left or if he's just smoking the paper at this point, fingers pinching the roach as he puts the cherry out in the pool water, tossing it as far as he can into the brush behind the house. "Got some leftover pizza, if you want. Come on," he says, standing up and offering a hand to Jonathan.

Jonathan pulls himself up and stumbles into Steve's space, a quiet, "Shit—," as Steve's hand comes up to Jonathan's elbows, steadying him. "I think I smoked too much."

His eyes light up in delight and a bright, breathless laugh escapes his mouth before he can stop himself. "You a lightweight, Byers?"

Jonathan laughs, tongue working in his mouth for a moment and Steve's eyes follow the movement as Jonathan traces his lips. "Fuck, my mouth is so dry. And no, I—I'm not normally a lightweight, that was a huge joint. And it's been a while. How much do *you* normally smoke?"

"Oh, I'm very high. I'm just better at hiding it," Steve retorts with a grin, leaning forward into Jonathan's space for a moment before his fingers find Jonathan's wrist, circling around it as he tugs him back across the hot pavement, towards the house.

Once inside, he pauses near the island to roll the cuffs of his jeans back down over his still damp ankles. Jonathan is spinning in a slow circle, taking in the various stacks of pizza boxes. "Leftover pizza would be where, exactly?" He asks, wandering over to start checking

boxes, putting empty ones on top of each other.

"Fridge," Steve answers with a raised eyebrow and a laugh. Jonathan makes a face, a 'right, that makes sense so why didn't I think of it' face.

While Jonathan digs around in the fridge, Steve's eyes land on the open liquor cabinet that he's already spent a few nights this week rifling through.

"You know what we need?" Jonathan says, distractedly digging through the fridge for the leftover pizza.

Steve crosses to the cabinet, pulling down two crystal old fashion glasses and setting them on the counter with a heavy *thud*. Jonathan stands up a little straighter at the noise, box of cold pizza forgotten.

"Whiskey or..." Steve mumbles, fingers tracing from one label to another. "Uh...whiskey?"

Jonathan lets the door of the refrigerator drift shut, leaning against it with his shoulder, arms crossed over his chest. But there's a hint of a grin pulling at his lips. "That's a terrible idea—I was just going to say we needed music."

He fills the glasses with ice and pulls down a bottle of whiskey, filling up both glasses halfway, passing one to Jonathan with a wicked grin. "To shitty dads," he says, holding his glass up between them.

Jonathan does the same, parroting, "To shitty dads."

They both throw back their glasses, swallowing large mouthfuls. Jonathan cringes, coughing and blinking away the tears in his eyes. "God—your dad has shit taste in liquor and cars, Steve," he says with a laugh.

Steve coughs too, clearing his throat and then takes another big gulp. "Had," he corrects after he swallows with another wince. "He had shit taste."

Jonathan's grin falls and he looks down at his glass. "Shit, I—," a shake of his head, taking another gulp while Steve tops off his own

glass. He does the same for Jonathan when he finishes off the last of his whiskey. "I'm—fuck," he says with a sigh, holding his glass still while Steve pours. "I'm just going to stop talking, now," he finishes lamely.

Steve grins, watching him squirm uncomfortably. "Don't worry about it," he laughs, closing the bottle of alcohol. "Come on, living room."

He leads the way, taking the bottle with him, sipping at his glass. The amber liquid goes down easier now, no longer burning his throat. When he first started helping himself to his dad's stash of liquor, he wasn't quite as tall as he is now. He used to have to jump up on the counter to reach the cabinet.

The very first time, he'd taken a sip of sambuca and nearly threw up in the sink. He decided he didn't "get it" and avoided drinking for as long as he could. That was until he and Tommy were invited to their first house party in high school and he was handed his first beer and he found he didn't hate it quite as much as he hated the sambuca.

Or even the whiskey he has in his hand now. Or the vodka he had in the flask at the funeral.

After he got used to the beer he became a little more adventurous. He never touched the sambuca again but he did top off the vodka and tequila with water so his dad wouldn't notice any was missing. And now that his dad was gone—and his mom never looked through the liquor cabinet, she had her own wine rack in the formal dining room—he could take from it as he pleased.

"I want a cigarette," he announces, slumping onto the couch unceremoniously. There's a blanket that's unfolded across the arm of the couch and he tugs it, pulling it across his body.

Jonathan laughs at him, a small shake of his head. But then his eyes land on the console table at the back of the room, and he lights up immediately, crossing over to it and breathing out an appreciative, "Wow!"

Steve pushes aside a couple of empty cans on the coffee table, setting his glass down as he turns to watch Jonathan inspect the cabinet.



“Do you mind if I...?” Jonathan gestures to the lid that lifts and Steve nods, motioning for him to help himself.

He does, a small unsure smile playing across his features. “Holy shit—this is a Garrard,” he mumbles, a hand sliding carefully across the sleek wood. He twists to look back at Steve. “This must’ve been like five grand.”

Steve shrugs and Jonathan turns back to look at the turntable inside the cabinetry.

“I’d kill for something like this,” he mutters under his breath, bending down to inspect the needle.

“I’ll make sure to write you into my will,” he says, tugging the blanket under his chin. He closes his eyes.

“It’s yours?” Jonathan asks skeptically.

Steve shrugs. “I mean, it will be, eventually. Right? And I never use it, so...”

Jonathan eyes scan over the record collection that’s on the shelf next to the turntable cabinet, a small snicker as he pulls out a sleeve. Steve tilts his head to read it. Madonna. Jonathan slides it back into place and then pulls out another. Madonna. And one more. Another Madonna. The look he gives Steve is almost gleeful.

Giving him a flat look, Steve shifts to sit up, grabbing his glass again and throwing back a swig of whiskey. “Those are my moms,” he mutters.

He thinks Jonathan may have said something in response as he sat at the other end of the couch. Something sharp, but not too sharp. Something witty, but vaguely dry. Dry like the whiskey. Like, *sure Steve, suuuure the Madonna records aren’t yours.*

And Steve might have said something like, “fuck off,” or “fuck you”, and he might have laughed, and Jonathan might have laughed with him, but Steve can’t concentrate on that right now.

Instead, he is blinking dully, eyes drifting towards the wide pane

windows to his left and the warm orange hues of the slowly setting sun. It's pretty, he thinks, and the sun feels warm like the whiskey in his stomach, warm like the way his cheeks flush when Jonathan leans against his shoulder, warm like the song slowly beginning to whine it's way out of the speakers across the room.

He doesn't recognize the music, but it's a woman singing—not Madonna—but he likes it in the same way he likes how Jonathan is swirling his drinking absently, the ice cubes clinking in his glass. It's distracting, and when he murmurs a slow: "Shit, I'm way too high," his stomach almost *doesn't* do a flip flop when he slides over, head falling deeply into Jonathan's lap.

Above him, Jonathan snickers, swirling the drink in hand over Steve's face, and his eyes drift again, this time across the room to the coffee table where his own drink sits, abandoned. It's probably for the best, he thinks, as the last thing he needs is more to drink, but it's like Jonathan is existing on a different wavelength than him, a different plane, and instead he tilts the glass over his mouth, an instructive, "Open up," as he threatens to pour the golden-colored liquid all over Steve's face.

Steve gets about half of it down, swallowing it eagerly and thinking it'd make for a neat party trick when he chokes. The whiskey threatens to burst out of his mouth, nearly making a mess of the cream colored suede fabric of the couch (and wouldn't his mom *love* that?), but he somehow manages to save it by burying his face in Jonathan's stomach as his lungs catch fire, ignited by poison.

Jonathan is still laughing at him by the time he stops coughing, the whiskey in his cup nearly gone, and Steve exhales, blinking as he stares at the ceiling again.

Jonathan smells like cheap laundry soap he thinks, and of course the weed, and his stomach does that thing again where he feels like he's just about to throw up. He doesn't, and when Jonathan leans forward, nearly pushing Steve out of his lap to set his empty drink down on the floor, Steve loudly declares that he's way too fucked up to be listening to Madonna.

"It's not Madonna," Jonathan snorts, "It's Fleetwood Mac, you idiot."

Steve just blinks again, a curious 'o'-shape taking hold of his mouth.

"Shit," Steve mumbles, scrubbing curled fists at his eyes. "Shit...I'm really...drunk. And high. I could fall asleep right now."

"It's not even dark out," Jonathan reminds him, but Steve doesn't care. Instead, he pulls himself out of Jonathan's lap, nearly eating shit on the floor.

"So? Have I ever shown you my room?" he asks, wobbling as he stands. "It's great. The best place for a nap," he assures him. He pulls on Jonathan's hand, and *oh*, it feels softer than he expected. Warm and clammy, almost, and Jonathan laughs, nearly stumbling as Steve yanks him up off the couch.

"My room is where all my best sleeping happens. A-game level stuff. Deep sleep city," Steve then tells him, pulling them out of the living room, only Jonathan pauses, tugging back on his grip. Steve turns just in time to catch him chewing on his lower lip, an incredulous expression masking the lines of his face, like he can't really believe Steve just told him that. Then, Jonathan bursts out laughing again and Steve starts to giggle too.

"No shit, Steve," Jonathan wheezes. "Where else would you sleep?"

"My...the...uh..."

He doesn't get to finish the thought, tripping over the first two steps of the staircase and nearly taking down Jonathan with him. They're a mess of giggles and limbs, clawing their way up the stairs.

Steve doesn't process anything else until his head hits the pillow and Jonathan's bounces down on the pillow next to him.

"Deep sleep city," Jonathan mumbles and it sends them both off into a round of laughter that slowly peters out into their soft, tandem breaths.

"Thanks for coming over to hang out," Steve mumbles when the silence has stretched on for two seconds or two years or maybe it's somewhere in between. He's not keeping score. Jonathan hums. "And thanks for the free weed." Jonathan hums again.

Steve opens his eyes and realizes Jonathan's are closed too and so he lets himself relax, focusing on the rise and fall of his own chest and the way the late afternoon sun shifts through the trees outside his window, casting flickering shadows against the backs of his eyelids.

When he opens his eyes again, the room is dark and his head is pounding. He blinks away sleep, eyes adjusting to the light that's coming in from the street lamp outside his window.

There's a glass of water and a bottle of painkillers on his nightstand in front of him. Almost as soon as he processes the state of discomfort he's in (stomach queasy and head pounding), the rest of the night comes flooding back. Twisting to look over his shoulder, he realizes that Jonathan isn't there anymore.

He sits up on one elbow, considering the bottle of pills and the glass of water, picturing Jonathan searching through the kitchen cabinets to find it and bring it all the way back up here only to leave without waking him up to say goodbye. It leaves a weird taste in his mouth and a heavy feeling in his lungs.

It almost feels like an invasion of privacy: Jonathan, rooting around in his brain and in his chest, another crushing moment of judgement. *Steve can't take care of himself, what a sad state, drunk and passed out, Jonathan must have thought, better coddle him since he clearly doesn't have his shit together.*

And yet, it feels nice. To be taken care of, that is. And he sort of hates himself for that. For needing it.

He rolls over and settles into his pillow, squeezing his eyes shut, trying to ignore the pressure and the stabbing pain of his hangover throbbing through his head like thunder. Trying not to think about the glass of water on the bedside table.

## **Notes for the Chapter:**

chapter title from the song of the same name by  
miniature tigers

update 5/20/21: i'm about halfway through ch 5!

just for the record, in case anyone was worried this thing wasn't gonna get updated. i'm just slowly chipping away at it between busy work and life nonsense.

## 4. every time we set the table (i flip it over)

### Summary for the Chapter:

I know it's been a bit of a wait, but I promise it was worth it.

This chapter has been my favorite so far. It's all downhill from here.

It's not like he wasn't lonely before. In fact, nothing about his situation had really changed. He'd spent most of his life alone in his too big, too put together, too cold house. And the house remains unchanged, it's as big and as cold as ever, and when he gets around to clearing out the empty takeout boxes and beer cans, it'll be as put together as it usually is, too.

*He* remains unchanged. Sure his dad died a few weeks ago, but it's not much different than how it was a few weeks and one day ago except now he no longer has to worry about tiptoeing around when the asshole is home. He has plenty of memories of times he'd spent weeks alone. Hell, it was just two summers ago that his dad was dealing with a client in Dallas for a month and a half and his mom was on an equally long retreat with one of her sorority sisters in Vermont or whatever.

The shitty job at Family Video remains the same. Hawkins remains the same. The world moves on. He goes to work, he clocks in, he clocks out, he goes home.

It's not like he wasn't lonely before, it's been this way for a long time now. And nothing has changed so the loneliness shouldn't have grown, it shouldn't have started to feel as all encompassing as it does. And it does.

Robin's talking, if only to fill the quiet, is a welcome relief from the silent void that seems to have opened up and swallowed him whole. The silent house, the glass of room temperature water that sits unmoved on his bedside table. The still water in the pool at the edge of the forest, unmoved.

The grass on the front lawn starts to turn brown and he realizes that, right...the sprinkler system is manual and he should probably start turning it on a few times a week like his mother does. It's the thing he thinks about every time he leaves for work, but never something he remembers when it would be convenient and so the small brown spots grow larger as the summer heat sets in.

The flowers wilt, the petals and bugs start to collect on the surface of the pool, replacing the fall and winter leaves, and life moves on.

He tries not to think about the glass of water that now lives permanently on his bedside table. Tries not to think about what it means, because--realistically, deep down--he knows it means nothing.

They've hung out twice. That doesn't mean they're friends now. All it means is that Jonathan pitied him. Bitter, grief-stricken Steve Harrington with the dead dad. Over-reacting to his passing by pretending he doesn't care. Newsflash: He *doesn't* care. He really doesn't. And he doesn't care about what Jonathan Byers must think about him, either.

So yeah, he kind of hates Jonathan for pitying him. He (and Nancy, for that fucking matter) could've just gone on pretending that he didn't exist like they have for the past, what... year and a half? If he had to choose between Jonathan caring and pitying him or Jonathan not paying him any attention at all, he'd choose the latter.

And it hadn't helped that he'd gone downstairs the next morning to find all the pizza boxes stacked in a neat little pile by the trash can, the empty beer bottles and cans gathered in a trash bag next to it. The house was just a touch neater than when they had passed out in Steve's bed.

But that had been weeks ago now--nearly a month--and if he's honest, the only time he really thinks about Jonathan is when he's trying to fall asleep, staring at the red numbers on the clock on his bedside table, distorted through the curve of the water.

Maybe when he wakes up, too: a patch of sunlight bursting through his curtains, glancing off the glass and reflecting onto the ceiling above his head. The wavering crescent of mirrored sunlight greeting

him each morning as he blinks sleep away, scratching at the stubble that's grown across his jaw.

And sometimes when he's stocking the newest release (this week it's *Back to the Future*) on the shelves at Family Video. Thoughts flit around half-formed, wisps of anger threading through the mindless task; spiteful thoughts, part relief and part disappointment, that they hadn't made plans to hang out again.

"Customer," he hears from his left, Robin's bored voice carrying over from where she's clearing videos and wiping down dusty shelves with a damp rag.

It's his turn, he knows, so he stands with a sigh, grabbing the stupid vest from where he'd slung it over the open box of Betamax tapes. The bell above the door tinkles as he slides his arms through the vest, heading for the register. "Welcome to Family Vide--" he starts to call out, stopping in his tracks as he looks up, greeted by Jonathan's amused grin. "Oh."

"Green really suits you," he teases and the tone alone makes Steve clench his fists.

He slips behind the counter, taking the rental boxes that Jonathan slides across the counter, opening to check that the tapes are in the correct boxes before he starts to process the returns on the ledger in silence.

"How have you been?" Jonathan prods, not leaving the counter. "Sorry I haven't dropped by or called. I actually just finished up with finals."

Steve hums, feigning interest. "I'm fine," he grunts. "You're all set. Were you going to check anything else out?" He glances up from the clipboard of paper.

Jonathan straightens up a bit, hand resting on the counter, fingers curling in a bit as he seems to process Steve's tone. He seems like he's about to say something before he pauses and glances over his shoulder. Steve's eyes find what Jonathan is searching for: the tall mop of brown hair that peeks over the nearby shelf of fantasy



movies. Will is much taller than Steve remembers, even taller than Jonathan. Has it really been that long since he last saw Dustin and the rest of the kids?

“Yeah, Will is picking something out,” Jonathan sighs, turning back to give Steve a quiet, scrutinizing look.

“Oh, cool.”

“Now that I’m done with finals, though...”

He hums again, eyeing the half torn box of Snickers on the counter, trying his hardest to tune Jonathan out.

“And school lets out this Friday...” he continues.

“Yep.”

“Actually, you should come to graduation.”

Steve snorts loudly. “Yeah, sorry, that sounds super fun and all, but I’m pretty sure I work that morning. Robin has to be there to play her oboe or whatever.” He gestures towards her and recognizes a slowing in the motion of the hand that’s wiping off the shelf against the back wall. Whoops.

“Doesn’t... Doesn’t she play french horn?” Jonathan asks, seeming a little confused.

“Sure, clarinet, flute, whatever.”

There’s a pause between them, Jonathan squinting at him like he’s trying to silently communicate something that Steve just isn’t picking up. And Steve, for what it’s worth, is doing his best to remain oblivious to what it is, eyes following the distracted back and forth of Robin’s dust rag on the same shelf over and over.

“What’s your problem?” Jonathan snaps, a little too loudly. Robin’s hand slows even further and Steve’s eyes pull away to glance over at Jonathan. “I told you I was busy with finals.”

“There’s no problem, man,” he sighs, shaking his head with a roll of

his eyes.

At this point, he's expecting Jonathan to drop it, to just give up and let them go their separate ways. It's the way this was always meant to go, anyway. They were never fully meant to be anything more than polite (or impolite) acquaintances. Passing ships in the night. Like birds on a wire, starting in the same small town, gusts of wind taking them in opposite directions.

"No, it sort of feels like you're mad at me," Jonathan counters. "But I'm not really sure what I did to piss you off."

"I'm not mad at you," Steve lies. "I'm just--"

His eyes twist to look over at Robin who is still distractedly cleaning the same spot on the same shelf, head tilted towards the floor, clearly eavesdropping.

"Just what?" Jonathan says impatiently, both hands curled around the edge of the counter, leaned over it slightly.

Steve gives an annoyed huff in response, rounding the counter with a roll of his eyes. Gripping onto Jonathan's arm, he pulls him along to where they can find a little privacy. Tugging the curtain aside, he pushes Jonathan into the partitioned off room that hangs awkwardly in the far right corner between the horror movies and all the boring, old, black and white classics.

Jonathan stumbles to a stop, glaring at Steve. His arms are stiff by his sides, fingers curled into fists. "Look, I'm sorry if you're angry that I fell off the face of the earth for these past few weeks but finals and college shit has taken up all my time and--"

"You cleaned my fucking house, okay?!" Steve snaps.

Jonathan's mouth hangs open, an abandoned syllable only half pronounced before he's caught off-guard. His mouth closes and then opens again. It snaps shut one more time before Jonathan's eyes narrow and he gives Steve a withering look. "You're mad at me because I picked up a few moldy pizza boxes and a tower of empty beer cans while trying to find my car keys so I could drive home?"

Steve's eyebrows are drawn, arms crossed over his chest, a defiant tilt to his hips. He pauses, though his expression and stance don't change. "Yes," he replies simply, heat behind his words gone and it's the only thing that might give Jonathan the indication that he's realizing he's over-thought this.

"The place was a mess, dude, and it was dark. It's not like I mopped the floors and dusted the baseboards, I just stacked a few things and swept all the cans off the table and into a trash bag. I was tired and I just wanted to go home, that was easier than searching for an hou--"

"You left water on my bedside table," Steve blurts out. There's no heat behind those words either because he's trying to remember why he's mad in the first place. It all feels so dumb now that he's saying it out loud.

Jonathan freezes, face contracting into something akin to bewilderment.

They're both quiet for a moment and Steve holds his breath, waiting for Jonathan to say something. He exhales harshly when Jonathan finally does:

"You're mad at me because I tidied and because I got you a cup of water?" Jonathan grinds out, eyes narrowing in on Steve. He can feel his shoulders inching up around his neck. "Did it leave a water ring or something? Are you mad I fucked up your furniture?"

"No, no," Steve answers quickly, back going stiff as he straightens up. "That's not--"

"Because, I can't think of any other reason a *normal* person would get mad about any of that," Jonathan gets out, voice raised louder than Steve's. "It just sounds like you're trying to find any reason to be pissed at me."

"It's because I don't need you to be my *fucking* mother, okay?" Steve spits out, matching Jonathan's pitch. He takes a shaky inhale, realizing how quickly this has gotten out of hand and he glances over his shoulder towards the main room of the store, hoping that Robin and Will didn't hear them, that there weren't any other customers

nearby.

Jonathan's eyebrows are raised to his hairline, but at least he's stopped talking, Steve thinks. At least he's not continuing to chew him out.

But something shifts in Jonathan's disposition; his eyebrows drop, the lines in his forehead echoes of what they were before, still etched into his face. His voice is low and gravely when he says, "No, if I was your *fucking* mother I would have abandoned you and fucked off to Arizona."

He can't help but recoil at that and Jonathan seems to do a fraction of the same, realizing almost immediately what he's said.

"Shit," Jonathan mutters, scrubbing a hand across his face, erasing the angry wrinkles between his eyebrows. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean--"

Steve shakes his head, a hand on his hip as he shifts on his feet, eyebrows raised and mouth hanging open, still a little in shock that Jonathan had said that at all. "Nah--" He snorts, unable to contain the grin on his face. "Fuck, I mean...you're right."

Jonathan lets out a breathy laugh, staring down at his shoes as he winces. "I'm not trying to... to mother you," he says slowly.

"Yeah, but it *feels* like you are, like you think I'm some kind of ticking time bomb," Steve says, a little exasperated, feeling like they're going in circles. He's got to get them out of this. To some sort of resolution. He's got to get back to work. "And I feel like I can't be myself around you, because being myself means--"

Jonathan tries to butt in, a half abandoned syllable that Steve plows through.

--It means the only way I'm going to get over it is to continue on like it didn't happen, right? To just move the fuck on. And, yes, I'm kind of living like a slob right now, okay? But you just have to deal with that, because that's all I have the energy for right now. And that's fine! Hell--" He starts to pace back and forth, throwing his arms up in the air, "--that's probably *normal*. And it's sort of smothering to feel

like I have to pretend to be normal or else you're going to think I'm drowning in-in... in *grief*. But I'm not drowning, right? I'm just... I'm treading water. Okay? And that's--that's good! That's *great* even! Because he was my dad! I should be doing much worse, right?" As he's pacing he notices a box that's tipped sideways and he pulls it from the shelf, holding it in his grip as he continues to rant. "And it's all fucked. Like...it's all downhill from here, for me, you know? Because he refused to give me a job or set me up with any sort of safety net out of spite. And my mom, as you so perfectly put it, abandoned me and fucked right off to Arizona." He waves his arms around, punctuating his point. "So, yeah. I'm fucking doggy paddling. And maybe it's up to my chin, but I'm still keeping my head above water. But I don't need it to be a spectator sport, okay?" He swings an arm around, gesturing to Jonathan with the empty rental display box.

"Okay," Jonathan says, eyes trained on the rental as an amused smirk grows. "Were you...recommending I rent--" he tilts his head, trying to read the title of the movie he's holding. "Uh... Jack Deveau's *A Night At The Adonis*?"

Steve looks down at the box in his hands. "What?" He blinks, staring at the sweaty naked bodies on the cover, a nervous laugh bubbling up out of his chest, finding where it was on the shelf and shoving it back into place next to the copy of *Naughty Girls Need Love Too* and *Great Sexpectations*. "No. Of course not. I was just fixing it."

Jonathan purses his lips, nodding carefully but not saying anything for a long moment. And then he bursts out laughing. "Sorry, you just--you brought me into the porn section to yell at me and then you spent most of the time waving a gay porn in my face."

"It wasn't in your face!" Steve says quickly.

"Okay, well it was close enough," Jonathan says, his laughter petering out, going soft before he sighs. "Look, I'm sorry. You're right, I shouldn't have tried to clean up as much as I did. But you're also being a little ridiculous, you can recognize that, right?"

He clears his throat, shifting from one foot to the other before finally answering with a quiet, "Yeah." He looks down at the ugly carpet,

the one that matches the arcade next door. "I just..." He shakes his head. "I don't get it."

"Don't get what, exactly, Steve?" Jonathan repeats, head tilting to the side to try to catch his eye.

"Any of it. This, you." He sounds exhausted to his own ears, tired of trying to figure out why they keep arguing and why he keeps lashing out. Tired of trying to figure out if he's reading too much or too little into everything that's happened between them. Everything that keeps happening.

Steve glances up to see Jonathan frown. "What's there to get? Not everyone's an asshole. People being nice doesn't mean you're being pitied." Jonathan sighs, rubbing at his eyebrow. "You overthink shit sometimes, Steve."

"That's not--" he cuts himself off with a sigh. "What do you get out of this? That's what I mean. This can't be fun, so...why are you still here? I obviously annoy the shit out of you."

Jonathan's frown deepens and for a moment Steve can see the cogs in his brain turning, grinding against each other, the *I could just stop all of this right now* thoughts. The *that's it, I've had enough of this bullshit, I'm done*, slipping into his stubborn resolve. But instead he takes a deep breath. "Getting high with you was pretty fun. Making fun of your Madonna vinyls was pretty fun, too," he says with a small smirk.

He can't help but respond with an annoyed huff. "I told you those records weren't mine," he says. And then, under his breath he adds: "*Like A Virgin* is a great fucking song though." It elicits a quiet laugh from Jonathan, the grin on his face making Steve's chest feel suddenly hollow. A small panic rises up in his throat, and he swallows thickly around the lump of it. "So you get to, what? Lose half your weed to some douchebag that bullied you in high school?"

Jonathan's voice comes out surprisingly sharp, almost reprimanding when he says, "Will you stop it with the fucking pity party? You sucked in high school, yeah. But, news flash, Steve: I did too! We're different now. People change. Are you still King Steve? I fucking doubt it, because last Christmas Will said you actually played DnD

with them--"

"Fuck off, Nancy told me once that she used to play with them and Will said *you* taught him how to play." Shaking his head because that's not the point. He can't help how the anger flares up in his voice again as they argue. "Maybe I did change but why the fuck do you *care*? Aren't you leaving for college soon anyway?"

"I don't know Steve! What do you want me to say? Do I need to submit an itemized list to be approved by you on why I like you?" Jonathan throws his arms out, gesturing wildly. "Sometimes you just like someone, there doesn't have to be a reason! I like you, okay?"

Something lurches in Steve's chest for a moment and he freezes, watching Jonathan as he tries to remember how to breathe. He thinks maybe he's going to be sick, that same panic from before, from making Jonathan laugh, spills up his throat. It feels like it wants to choke him, to burn him from the inside out. His vision feels like it's tunneling in around him and he doesn't know why he's reacting so strongly to any of this. He tries to focus: a deep breath in. A slow exhale. "Okay," he says, steady and quiet, his heartbeat the opposite.

"Okay? That's it? And yeah I'm going to college but that doesn't mean I'm not coming back. You want me to pretend you don't exist? It can be done, but then I'd be just like your shitty parents and--" He trails off, seeming to realize that Steve has gone strangely still. A quieter: "uh, Steve?"

Steve's eyes drift from the middle distance, focusing back on Jonathan, his brows softening a bit. "Hm?" He's mindlessly chewing at the inside of his lip, suddenly feeling overwhelmingly nervous and lightheaded. "I'm fine."

"Are you sure?"

*No, he thinks. No, you keep popping up unexpectedly, continuing to make appearances right when I think you've finally forgotten about me again. You keep forcing me to realize that I don't hate you as much as I thought I did, that maybe I actually kind of like you, too. You keep saying shit that makes my chest feel tight and doing things that make me question everything and--*

"Yeah, no... you keep going. This is entertaining. Tell me about how shitty my parents are again, as if I don't know," he says weakly, distracted as he walks toward the curtain, pulling it back and nearly running into Robin. She skitters away like a raccoon caught digging through a trash can.

He clicks his tongue in annoyance, watching as she disappears into the storage room. He makes a beeline back behind the counter, startling to shuffle papers around aimlessly. Jonathan has followed him out, rubbing sheepishly at the back of his neck.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" Jonathan murmurs, leaning into the counter again. "Just... I'm getting more weed from Danny tomorrow," he says, continuing to keep his voice low. "How about I swing by on Friday?"

Steve blinks down at his ledger and then looks up at Jonathan, considering him for a moment. He takes in how sharp his features are: his piercing eyes, his hollow cheeks, the edge of his cheekbones. It makes the same feeling twist up in his chest, uncomfortable but manageable now that it's something he's considering on his own terms.

It's a feeling he's familiar with, one he can put a name to. Instead, he gives a slow, jerky nod of his head. "Yeah, that sounds nice, actually," he says. It takes everything in him to pull his eyes away from the small, satisfied smirk of Jonathan's lips.

"Cool," Jonathan says, tapping the counter with his knuckles.

"Jon." Will slides up next to him, headphones plugged into a beat up, worn out Walkman and Steve feels at least a small amount of relief that Will probably didn't hear a single word of their argument.

Will tugs the headphones down around his neck, holding out two different movie cases for Jonathan's approval. Steve watches as Jonathan nods and Will slides the boxes across the counter while Jonathan takes his wallet out to pass over his membership card.

The nickname Will had used for Jonathan rattles around in his brain as he writes their info down. Jon. It's obvious, of course, but



something about hearing Will use it...it's different. He glances up at him, at Jon, feeling his cheeks go hot and then he busies himself again with ringing them up for their rentals.

Jonathan passes over a few bills and Will grabs the cases and gets his headphones back over his ears, already heading for the door. Jon pauses, leaning in as he murmurs a quiet, "See you tomorrow. Goodnight, Steve."

He waves goodbye, an uncomfortable smile stretching thin across his face, and Jon turns to wave back as he slides out the door and into the humid summer night.

"Wow," Robin says loudly, just as the door finishes swinging closed. Steve wears a scowl as he watches the Byers cross the darkened parking lot to the beat up Ford Pinto. "Have anything you wanna tell me?"

"No?" Steve says, staunchly refusing to look over at her, busying himself with closing out the exchange log.

"Nothing?" She prods, spinning around the counter to sidle up behind him. "Not even about how I've been replaced as your best friend by Jonathan Byers of all people?"

Steve scoffs, rolling his eyes. "Jonathan and I aren't friends," he snaps back without hesitation.

"Oh, so what was all that?" She says, settling into the corner of the checkout counter, resting on an elbow as she slinks low and catlike into his eyeline. "Lover's quarrel?"

He lifts his head, blinking at the now empty parking spot, trying to process the words she's just said. "What?!" He asks, an incredulous scoff. "No."

"But he *likes* you," she teases, reaching across the counter and briefly blocking his view of the ledger to grab a magazine. She falls back against the corner of the counter, starting to flip through it. Steve doesn't move. Doesn't respond and after a moment of silence she looks up, her face contorting as some sort of realization seems to

dawn on her. “Holy shit--”

“No,” Steve gets out quickly, trying to squash whatever it is she’s assuming based on his silence. He’s not going to even *think* about it. “Absolutely not--”

“You like him,” she shouts, grinning. And now he’s *thinking* about it. Fuck.

“I don’t--”

“You *so* do!” She continues, gleeful.

“I really, *really* don’t--”

She sets the magazine down, hopping up onto the counter and swinging her legs to kick him in the side. “You do. I know gay panic when I hear it,” Robin gloats, laughing at her own joke. “Oh my god, you *like* a boy. You’ve been holding out on me, Harrington! And here I thought--”

“Shut up!” He hisses, checking to make sure the video store is as empty as it was before Jonathan had strolled in. He bangs a finger down on the register, the drawer opening with an obnoxious *cl-CHING*, and he starts to gather the bills to count them.

“--I was all alone. The only one in Hawkins. But you’ve been going through this and you haven’t even *told* me.”

“You’re such an asshole, dude, what the *fuck*!” He bursts out, loud and annoyed. “Why were you eavesdropping in the first place, huh?”

Robin’s eyebrows shoot up and she puts both hands up in surrender, just as her mouth opens to respond, a familiar shift of light passes through the windows at the front of the store, a car pulling into the parking lot.

They both glance out and Steve feels his stomach hurdle toward the Earth’s core as he takes in the sight of the car in the flickering street lamp over the parking lot. Robin doesn’t seem to have noticed and has already started arguing about whatever it was he had just said.

The bell above the door tinkles and in walks the last person he expected to see in the middle of an identity crisis he doesn't even want to *think* about. The universe hates him, he thinks. There is a God and he's being punished.

Robin seems to catch on to what's happening, her words trailing off almost instantly. She hops down from where she's perched to quickly busy herself with finishing up their closing duties on the other side of the store.

"Hey, Steve," Nancy says as she steps up to the checkout counter.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

chapter title from set the table by ritt momney & claud

also if you'd like to chat you can find me on [tumblr](#) or on [twitter](#)! :)

### **Author's Note:**

work title from bloom by troye sivan

AU post s3 where the byers didn't move